



Living in limbo...
Ladislav Balaz (left) and a fellow Czech Gypsy on the beach at Clacton-on-Sea, while Valeria Bockova and daughter Mary (right) also wait anxiously to see what the future holds for them

PHOTOGRAPHS:
ADRIAN ARBIB

SYLUM SEEKERS 1

Forced out of their homes by racists who threatened to kill them, Gypsies are still not considered genuine refugees by the government, reports **Jake Bowers-Burbridge**

On the road to nowhere

Lucky heather! Come and buy some lucky heather. It's a call still used by Gypsies plying their age-old trades.

But while Gypsies may be used to dealing in fortunes, they are rarely possessed of them. As such, they are always seen as perpetual scam artists, and the ultimate embodiment of the economic grant. They are a people without state, or even an effective international organisation to defend them. If they are the ultimate scapegoats to be abused with impunity as "bogus" asylum seekers.

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the governments who now find themselves dealing with a people defined by the Czech president, Vaclav Havel, as "the litmus test of civil society". But how well is Britain standing up to that test?

Ladislav Balaz is a Romany refugee under siege. The electricity in his north London home stopped working days ago, his sister-in-law has died from cancer after being refused treatment because of her race, and he's just heard that skinhead gangs are rampaging through the home town he fled in the Czech province of northern Moravia.

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skin might have betrayed his origins in a much whiter Britain 100 years ago, but nowadays it just helps him fit into the multicultural crowd.

He enjoys the new-found anonymity he has gained on the streets of north London. "In my home town, Orlova, my colour marks me out," he says. "We never ventured on to the streets at night. You see, in the Czech Republic there are only two kinds of people, the 'white' Czechs and the 'black' Roma. Skinheads have killed 32 Roma in the last 10 years. My friend Milan was one of them. A gang of them beat him to death outside my home because, to them, he was just a filthy Gypsy."

Outraged by the attack, Balaz sought justice for his friend, only to witness a conspiracy you might

think was more at home in apartheid South Africa than an aspiring member of the European Union. "The coroner told me that he had been run down by a truck," Balaz says, "but we saw them kill him with our own eyes."

Six weeks later, in June 1998, Balaz received an anonymous letter signed by the "Satanic sect, k.k.k., S.S." and a swastika. It said, "God warns you, quickly get going. Hitler should have lived two more years, then there would not be any more gypsies. We want a Moravia clean of black gypsies". Ladislav fled with his wife Marta and his six children to Britain, where his life is now in limbo. He is one of the thousands of supposedly "bogus" refugees reviled by the tabloid media.

The 1951 UN convention relating

to the status of refugees supposedly guarantees protection to any person who has fled their country "owing to a well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, membership of a social group or political opinion". But Home Office guidelines to magistrates refuse to recognise Romany persecution, despite its continuing documentation by Amnesty International, the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the US state department.

"The Home Office says that you are not a genuine refugee because you are a Gypsy," says the magistrate in a refreshing dose of honesty at Taylor House, where immigration appeals are heard in London. The woman she is addressing has no legal representation and it's clear

that this is the end of the line for her. Dr Donald Kenrick is there as well, giving testimony on Romany persecution in Poland, after recognising the defendant's name as Polish Romany on the list of cases to be heard in the court that morning.

Kenrick has been a tireless fighter for Romany rights for the last 30 years. At the age of 70, he spends many of his days voluntarily helping refugees fight for their claims to asylum.

"There's at least 10 cases every day," he says. "I come along when I can, find a case and do my best to get the government to see that these people are genuinely persecuted because of their race. We've won a few."

But the few cases that have been won are a mere drop in the ocean. Of the 5,000 Romany asylum

seekers to have arrived in this country, only three have been granted leave to stay — dramatically lower than for other asylum seekers. Figures from the Refugee Council state that 54% of asylum applications are granted on their first hearing. The disparity between the treatment faced by the Romany people and other persecuted groups is something Kenrick has made a point of experiencing all over the world.

Valeria Bockova tells me about the Czech Republic in her tiny flat in suburban Clacton-on-Sea, Essex. Her mantelpiece, adorned with family photos, looks just like any mother's enthusiastic collection of family portraits — until she starts explaining why she is here.

In the light of what she tells me, it becomes a chilling shrine to



Romany suffering and a family torn apart by racial violence and government hostility.

"The skinheads grabbed him and shoved poison down his throat," says Valeria while looking at the worn portrait of her brother. It was 1983 and he was just 17. But it was a horrific indication of things to come. Britain is the fifth country she has come to looking for sanctuary. She hasn't found much.

On arrival at Stansted airport, her husband, Villem Bock, was arrested and was detained at Tinsley House, near Gatwick, after three days of interrogation.

Valeria clutches a letter about the detention like a left luggage receipt. In a language she can't understand, the reason for the detention is given thus: "I am detaining you for examination because I have further inquiries to make and more questions to ask you." The £87.30 she and her daughter are given every week to live on barely covers her food and utility bills. She simply cannot afford the £37.35 cheap day return to Gatwick to see her husband. "I want to eat meat, not biscuits," she says as she shows us her near empty fridge. Seeing your husband, it seems, is a luxury for a refugee.

Only one of Valeria's four children, Mary, is with her. Her son Stefan is in Norway, daughters Berta and Valeria are in Canada. At the age of 10, and after only two months in this country, Mary has a command of English and a stoical understanding of humanity that can only have been learnt the hard way. "Some people good, some people bad," she says about the people of Clacton. She explains that the children in her street have been told not to play with her, but some of the kids at school are interested in why she is here.

Valeria is crying after getting off the phone with her son Stefan. I think of telling her that everything is going to be all right and that her family name, Bock, actually means "luck" or "fortune" in English Romani. But I don't. Somehow I don't think she'd appreciate the irony of it.

Jake Bowers-Burbridge has spent the last three years on the road tracing his Romany ancestry.

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